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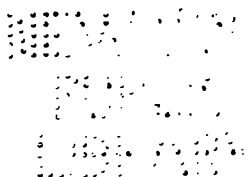
HER HEART WAS TRUE

*A STORY OF THE PENINSULAR WAR
FOUNDED ON FACT*

BY

AN IDLE EXILE

AUTHOR OF "INDIAN IDYLS," "IN TENT AND
BUNGALOW," "THE WEE WIDOW'S CRUISE," ETC., ETC.



NEW YORK
CASSELL PUBLISHING COMPANY

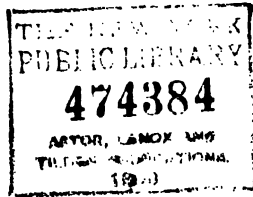
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HER HEART WAS TRUE.

CHAPTER I.

AT CORFE.



HERE the bold range of downs which form the backbone of the Isle of Purbeck dips, in grim precipices, into the Channel at St. Aldhelm's Head, pious hands, in days of yore, reared a sturdy little chapel. Perched nearly five hundred feet above the sea, at the extreme verge of the lofty headland, and exposed to the full force of the wild south-westers, raging up Channel from the Atlantic, it was doubtless

anster from

designed quite as much as a beacon or a lookout, as for a house of prayer, wherein the monks might intercede with good St. Nicholas, the patron saint of mariners, for the safety of vessels passing this iron-bound coast.

But in the early days of the present century the coastguard had superseded the monk, and from St. Aldhelm's Chapel the former kept a sharp watch for lurking smugglers, or even the fleet of the victorious Bonaparte himself.

The chapel, however, served for yet a third purpose—at least, in the case of a tall, lissom, country girl, who, with hood firmly tied over her yellow hair, toiled thither one spring morning, over the bleak downs. Without pausing at the summit to admire the far-spreading view of sea and down and moor, she entered the low Norman doorway, and, by the light from the single narrow slit window,

groped her way to the central column, from which sprung four intersecting arches. The place was silent and deserted, rarely disturbed, save by a coastguardsmen on his beat, or some stray sheep benighted on the cliff.

But for Bessie Sweetapple's purpose the quieter the better. She groped round the pillar till she found a small cavity on one side of it. Then, with hands that trembled with excitement, she took a pin from her shawl, and crooking it, dropped it into the hole, muttering indistinctly the while, her face brightening, and a flush deepening the healthy color on her cheek.

This was St. Aldhelm's wishing-place, and Bessie Sweetapple had toiled up thither to perform the ancient rite, and to repeat the ancient charm, in order to gain the secret wish of her heart.

Her errand finished, she started on her return journey. Several

miles of up-and-down walk across the hills lay before her, till from the edge of a stone quarry, above Langton, she saw Corfe town and castle lie in the niche in the downs before her. The quarry was deserted, for it was Shrove Tuesday and Marblers' Day, the quarrymen's annual festival at Corfe; and Bessie sat herself down on a large block of Purbeck marble, to rest. Before her rose proudly the keep of Corfe Castle, a magnificent wreck after its famous siege, when it was so ably defended by its gallant *chatelaine*, Lady Banks. Beneath the walls cowered the ancient royal borough, the Windsor of the Saxon Kings, nestling round the church tower, from the roof of which sacrilegious hands of Puritan assailants had stripped the leads to make cannon balls for the assault.

Suddenly Bessie turned and started at the sound of footsteps

behind. Her superstitious mind conjured up visions of evil spirits, which were well known in these parts, as witness the horseshoe nailed to the wooden capstans at the quarries' mouths, to keep the witches off.

But it was flesh and blood, in the shape of a stout, strong young quarryman, rather under middle height, with a reddish beard growing on his face, who came down the hill and approached her.

"Good-marnin', Bessie Sweet-apple. It's a terrible lucky soight meetin' wi' you like this, virst thing on Marblers' Day. And what may you be a-doin' this side Carfe?"

He made as though he would have sat down beside her, and admiration gleamed undisguisedly out of his small, close-set gray eyes. But Bessie started to her feet with alacrity.

"That's naught affair o' yours, Jonas Teague. I must be a-gettin'

on, vor I promised' Uncle Mat as I'd help him to-day in the tap-room. So good-day t' ye, Teague."

"Not at all, and gently, lass," returned the quarryman, not to be put off so easily. "'Tis toime I was down in Carfe, too, for the fun 'll soon be a-beginnin'. So I'll see thee säfe to the Guinea, Bessie."

Anything but delighted at this offer of escort, Bessie Sweetapple walked on in front, with a disdainful toss of her head.

"'Twasn't for naught as I started a hare as I came across t' heeäath this marnin', seems to me!"

"You're terrible down on a chap, Bessie," said Teague insinuatingly, trying to sidle up to her. "What vor zhould ye think it so unlucky to meet with me? I'm sure I be glad enow to zee thee."

Bessie made no reply, and

looked straight before her, as if she did not hear him.

"I thinks about you, Bessie, all day long when I be at vurk. When I'm down there in the quarry at Tilly Whim, and the waves dashes over us vrom the beach below, zeems to me as if the very gulls a-screeching an' a-wheeling overhead called: 'Bessie! Bessie!'"

"They be much more loikely a-larfin' at ye, Jonas," retorted Bessie; "gulls larfs loike humans, ye naw!"

Jonas grew nettled.

"I'd been a-thinkin', Bessie, as come *next* Shrove Tuesday and Marblers' Day, perhaps *I* might be the one to have to give the new ball when we plays football down at Ower on the harbor."

This was a delicately turned insinuation, for the last-married quarryman was bound to provide a new football at the annual

match on the gala day. But it fell flat with Bessie.

"An' I'm thinking it'll be a long toime avore you'll be put to that expense, Jonas Teague," she laughed. "But ye'd better ask the gulls, as they zeems to know everything!" and she laughed again disdainfully.

Teague got really angry.

"I doan't know what call ye've got to be larfin' at me, Bessie Sweetapple! You zee as I doan't make ye larf on t'other zoide o' that pretty mouth o' yours!"

And, very indignant, the quarryman turned aside, taking a different path down into Corfe, leaving Bessie, to her intense satisfaction, to pursue her way alone.

Corfe was all agog. Leaving the capstans idle at the quarries' mouths, the quarrymen had poured from bleak down, from spray-lashed cliff, from sheltered valley, and from snug bay, down

into the old town under the shadow of the hoary castle which had witnessed the foul murder of the Saxon monarch. In the Council Hall, the Wardens of the Company of Purbeck Marblers had just held their annual meeting and enrolled as members those, born sons of quarrymen, who wished to toil at the ancient trade among their native hills. The band of neophytes, all in their Sunday best, and an old fiddler at their head, were proudly parading the streets.

Bessie turned into the Guinea, where her uncle, the landlord, in his best wig and breeches, the latter nearly concealed by an enormous apron, was hard at work attending to his customers.

"Good-marnin', Bessie; better late than never, lass. Ye've a-come in toime to lend yer aunt a hand wi' the eäle there. Zeems a thirsty marnin' vor them as has come in from avar, the quarrymen

zeems as droy as the stanes they wurks. But we've been 'a-lookin' vor thee all the marnin', Bessie."

"But I'd an errand to do virst, uncle, up Langton way," was Bessie's somewhat shamefaced rejoinder, and she busied herself among the tankards to hide her confusion.

Suddenly there was a cry raised without, and both customers and host rushed excitedly to the door.

"The boys be a-comin'!"

And, indeed, the procession of newly inducted quarrymen, preceded by the fiddler, had just turned the corner of the marketplace and were coming down the street toward the Guinea, exercising, as they passed along, their ancient right of kissing every unmarried woman, not the daughter of a quarryman, they came across.

"Look to theeself, lass!" cried someone behind to Bess.

But it was too late. One of the company made a deliberate dart at her from its midst, and saluted her on both cheeks before she had time to escape.

The next moment, however, two well-directed blows from someone unseen behind Bess laid him sprawling in the gutter.

His companions made a rush for the assailant, who, but for the timely closing of the alehouse door by the landlord, would probably have fared ill at their hands.

Bess found herself, with cheeks aflame, face to face with her champion.

"I wouldn't 'a' done it," muttered the latter apologetically, "if it hadn't been Jonas Teague! But I warn't a-goin' to stand it from *him*. He done it a-purpose, he did, Bess."

Bess blushed again.

"I knawed as he did! He be mortal jealous, be Jonas Teague.

But thank'ye, Robin, I'll do ye a good turn one day!"

And she lifted her blue eyes to meet his, and they sparkled as they had done over the wishing hole in St. Aldhelm's Chapel.

But Jonas Teague as he picked himself up out of the gutter and rejoined his companions, muttered sulkily to himself: "I'll be ever wi' him yet! If I die for it, I wull!"





CHAPTER II.

SURPRISED BY THE REVENUE MEN.

THE newly enfranchised quarrymen continued their march through deep lanes and over heathery moor, to Ower, the pier on Poole Harbor where the stone was shipped. Here they presented the usual tribute of a pound of pepper to the representative of the lord of the manor, and were regaled on special cakes by the cottager at the pier head. Then, a new football having been provided by the last-married quarryman, they played the annual football match, before a crowd of spectators from

Corfe and the neighboring village of Studland, and it was dusk ere the merry-makings were ended.

But Jonas Teague, onerous and fatiguing as the day's proceedings had been to him, did not go back to Corfe with the rest.

Night, as it fell, saw him creeping stealthily along rough moorland tracks by the shores of the winding estuary, and stumbling over the sandhills which fringed Studland Bay. His thoughts were not exactly pleasant ones, though he was cheered in his weary walk by one of the strongest passions of mankind—revenge.

A year ago he had met and fallen in love with Bessie Sweetapple, when she was staying with her uncle in Corfe. Looking forward to the time when he should become a regular quarryman and able to think of marriage, he had dreamed fond dreams about her. Judge, then, of his bitter disappointment, when these had been

rudely dispelled by discovering, when the October "mop" fair brought Bessie again to Corfe, that she was keeping company with Robin Norcott, of her own village.

Studland lies sheltered in deep, crooked lanes among lofty elms. Through these Teague groped his way past the gabled manor house and the tiny Norman church, till he came to the one inn, the Blue Anchor, kept by Robin Norcott's father. It stood at the cross lanes, facing the remains of an ancient stone cross. Behind the house the hill rose abruptly and wept away up to the downs which backed the village.

All lights were out in the picturesque, thatched, stone cottages, and the village seemed asleep. The Blue Anchor was closed, but there were lights and sounds within. Jonas Teague peered through the thick hedge which divided the lane from the garden.

He presently distinguished two or three figures, Norcott and his son among them, busily and silently engaged in loading a donkey cart with objects that they brought forth from a concealed opening in the hillside.

This operation continued for some time and the unseen watcher squatting in the hedge grew sleepy, tired as he was with his peregrinations and his football. But he was suddenly aroused and his patience rewarded by a hoarse whisper from one of the workers.

"That'll do vor t'night, lads. There's room enow in th' cellar now, an' Dan has a goodish bit o' the load. Ye must be off, man, if ye wants to be at Carfe avor daylight, an' we must be gettin' down to th' shore, lads, th' tide's on the turn."

The night was so dark and starless that Jonas had some difficulty in keeping the Norcotts in view as he followed them cautiously

through the village. But he was wide awake now, and his heart beat high with wicked hope. Indeed he had come upon a much better thing than he had even expected in his wildest dreams, when he laid his little scheme to repay Robin Norcott for knocking him down in Corfe that morning.

Like everybody else in the country side, he had long had his suspicions of the Norcotts. The Blue Anchor was but a poor business, and yet old Norcott was a "warm" man, and many of his cronies, in the little parlor behind the bar, had enjoyed snacks of first-rate French brandy, and smokes of good tobacco, which belied the appearance of the little hostelry. That Jonas Teague, however, should be the instrument of catching them red-handed, was indeed a stroke of luck for the latter.

Old Solomon Sweetapple's cottage stood quite out of the

village, under the shadow of the Red Cliff, a little jutting headland, which divides the bay, and also the rolling moorland country to the north, from the chalk downs about the Old Harry Rocks. These latter are two huge chalk pillars standing out in the sea beyond the promontory where the lofty backbone of the Purbeck Downs dips into the sea opposite the Needles.

A little brook which brawled through the village lanes, crossed here and there in front of cottage doors by rude stone slabs, had cut itself a gully under the Red Cliff by which it tumbled into the bay. The sides of the "chine," as the local name is, are clothed with holly and honeysuckle and fern, and halfway up stood Sweet-apple's cottage.

As the Norcotts passed through the village, they threw, here and there, a stone against a cottage door. Forthwith a figure would

sally out and join them silently. Then they slipped down the chine, and in front of Sweetapple's paused and gave a low whistle.

A light appeared and lit up the tall figure and yellow hair of Bessie Sweetapple.

Jonas Teague slunk among the brushwood on the bank. How pretty seemed the momentary peep he caught of it! But it added fuel to his wrath.

By the time he dared to emerge from his concealment, the men had passed down on to the beach, where Solomon Sweetapple, who had now joined them, kept his fishing-boat. Teague crept stealthily up the side of the gully, past the cottage.

From the top of the cliff he could clearly see what was going on. He was none too soon. The starlight had brightened a little, and he could indistinctly make out the lines of a vessel in the bay.

From the beach came sounds

as of boats being pushed off, and of the splash of oars in the water.

Teague waited to see and hear no more. The moment for action had arrived. He turned sharp round to get back under cover of the brushwood. But in so doing he sent some sand and stones rattling over the edge of the cliff.

The sound, slight as it was, caught the ear of another unseen watcher, who was none other than Bessie herself, looking on from the cottage garden. She caught a glimpse of a figure, as Teague disappeared among the undergrowth, but it was enough.

As Jonas Teague crept along in the darkness among the thickets which edged the cliff, and then, when at a safe distance, slid down its sandy face, he was followed. The brave girl pursued him unnoticed, as he sped at the top of his speed along the sands toward the coastguards' cottages at the far end of the bay. Only when

she had made quite sure whither he was bound, did she pause a moment for breath. Then she doubled back like a hare to the group at the mouth of the chine.

But Fate was against her. Halfway to the coastguard's station Teague met one of those functionaries on his beat, and by the time Bessie had reached the Red Cliff, the myrmidons of the law were hard upon her track. She heard their footsteps, their muttered words of command; she saw some disperse to form a *cordon* along the cliff to inclose the smugglers, as in a net.

But the latter were on the alert, too. When Bessie gave the well-known signal of alarm, there was an instant dispersal—as of rabbits scurrying back to their burrows.

The vessel might have been a phantom ship looming in the darkness, so noiseless did she become. Old Sweetapple crept by a by-way up the cliff known only to

himself, back to his cottage, and was snug in bed and hard to awaken when the coastguards knocked at his door shortly afterward.

But his daughter would not go home till she was assured of Robin Norcott's safety.

The latter was standing up to his middle in the shallow sea, engaged in some mysterious hauling operation, when they were surprised by the coastguards. Finding his retreat cut off he determined to stop where he was, wading out noiselessly with the falling tide. It was very cold work, but it was safe; that is to say, as long as night and darkness lasted.

But the coastguards were not going to be balked. A few domiciliary visits at houses that they had every reason to suspect, convinced them that some of their prey were still hiding about the scene of action, though the vessel,

of course, had stolen off noiselessly with the tide.

Therefore Bessie, lurking anxiously under the shadow of the Red Cliff, presently heard with alarm the order given for the sentries to remain at their posts till dawn; and, as the sky grew clearer toward the east, she decided that something must be done.

If necessity is the mother of invention, love must be its father; for presently, Robin, getting cold and cramped, and wondering how much longer he could hold out where he was, heard a sound as of a boat being stealthily pushed toward him.

At first he thought it was the coastguards making for him; then he heard Bessie's voice in a hoarse whisper:

"Robin! where are you?"

The plucky girl had waded into the water, and untying the little dingey, which she knew was fas-

tened to a floating buoy, was pushing it toward him.

"Get in quick," she went on, as loud as she dare. "They're patrolling the beach, and they'll be back directly. Don't ye row till ye're out at sea; the tide will take you—it's runnen fást!"

Robin tried to feel for her hand in the dark.

"Bessie, lass, you're a brave 'un! If I could only git to ye——"


"Hush, Robin! There be no toime to lose over—lookkee zharp, lad! And moind, Robin, doan't ee go vor to come back yet awhile, not avor this has blown over. It's been a near thing this time."

The approaching sound of footsteps scrunching over the sand stopped her, and with a hasty shove, she pushed the boat out to sea.



CHAPTER III.

THE GHOSTLY RIDER OF REMPSTONE.

O sooner had Jonas Teague, as he imagined, seen the noose tightened round the smugglers' necks, than he meditated beating a retreat. Clearly, Studland was not a safe place for him any longer; for his mere unexplained presence there might lead the villagers to suspect that he had betrayed them. It was everything to him that Bessie should not know of his share in the night's work, and he resolved to get back to Corfe as soon as possible. But this was sooner said than done. The whole vil-

very true, and he heard very unpleasant tidings.

"It's all safe, is it?" inquired Sweetapple.

"All gone to ground, like so many rabbits on t' heath when a fox is out," returned the other. "But my lad's not come hoām."

"Na more bain't my gal," said Sweetapple.

"Then I makes zure they be togither. She's a brave lass, and she runned her best for t' give the warning; but she wur not a minit too zoon, and it wur a near thing. But she did her best, did Bessie. I tell ye what, Zweetapple—I love that lass as if zhe wur me darter already; and so zhe may be, as far as I be conzarned, I tell that boy o' mine."

"Zhe be a good lass," replied the father, "an' zhe'll make a good wife. Zhe aint zaid nothin' to me, but I makes no doubt but that they two understands each other; and I'll tell thee what,

Norcott, there aint a lad in the whole o' Purbeck—go where ye wull—as I sooner give her to——”

“Hist! don't 'ee hear summat?” interrupted the other, and the two listened eagerly for a few minutes.

But the sound had been only caused by Teague, who was absolutely writhing behind the holly bush at what they were saying. It is bad enough to have to play the imprisoned eavesdropper twice in one night in a cramped and constrained position. But to have your rival's praises sung in your ears meanwhile——

“It's naught. I think we'll have no more visitors to-night. But why doan't Bessie get hoām!”

“Depend upon it, zhe be a-helpin' Robin. He wur a good way out in t' bay when zhe whistled, an', maybe, he couldn't get away so easy——”

“Trust Robin Norcott to zave himself, zomehow,” laughed old

Sweetapple. "T' lad's as many lives as a cat, as quick as a hare. Ye mind 'ow he guv 'em the slip that night as Dan Lawrence sprained his ankle, and we'd to carry him home? If it hadn't been vor Robin, he'd 'a' been cotched—zure as fate. But Robin drew all the King's men off arter him, he did. And a prutty chase he led 'em—all up on t' moor, right round by t' Agglestone Rock, an' then lay low in t' bog this zoide o' t' Little Zea, till marnin'"—and the old man chuckled aloud.

"All the zame, I think I'll go and have a look down on the beach, and zee if I can zpy 'un," the father added; and then to Teague's intense delight, the pair took themselves off, and, cramped and cold and very annoyed, he was able to emerge from his hiding-place and pursue his homeward way.

Once clear of the deep, winding

lanes of Studland, the road to Corfe lay between the moor and the downs. The night was intensely dark, and the way most lonely and of evil fame; and nothing but stern necessity would have tempted any inhabitant of that neighborhood to traverse it alone at night. But Teague had no alternative. All the same, he disliked it more and more every step he took. He whistled to give himself courage, and to drown his unpleasant thoughts and his fear. But in vain. As he approached Rempstone Hall, the park paling of which ran along the roadside for a mile or more, his heart sank within him. On the other side, to his right, now rose a long plantation of dark and gloomy Scotch firs—and here it was that, according to local legend (in which, of course, in accordance with the spirit of the times, Teague firmly believed), the ghostly horseman of

Rempstone was wont to be heard to ride.

Teague's guilty conscience worked upon his already over-heated imagination, and increased his fears, with every step he took, slinking along under the park fence, as far as he could possibly get from the dreaded fir belt.

Ah! what sound was that, rising above his own footsteps—now near—now far—yet ever regular—and rhythmical? Teague's blood ran cold; he stood still to listen, his knees trembling under him. Oh, horror! nearer and ever nearer, from the other side of the dark fir trees came the appalling sound of a horse's hoofs falling in regular gallop on the turf. Teague stared, his eyes starting out of his head with horror, expecting every moment to see the awful apparition of the wicked Squire of Rempstone, doomed to ride forevermore, burst upon him in all its horror.

Then a panic seized him. He started off running, as fast as his legs would carry him, pursued with the dreaded gallop ringing behind him in his ears, till breathless, giddy, stumbling, and dazed, he tumbled — more dead than alive — into a ditch, where, next morning, some men, going to work, found him still half senseless.





CHAPTER IV.

OUT OF THE FRYING PAN INTO THE FIRE.

WHEN the early light of the spring dawn gleamed on the white cliffs about Old Harry and his wife, and set the rooks cawing among the elms that embosom Studland Church, three people experienced three totally distinct, but equally unpleasant, surprises.

The first of these was Jonas Teague, as he awoke stiff and aching with his last night's slumbers in the ditch, and heard from the two laborers who had discovered him, the unsatisfactory intelligence that the bird had escaped

the snare of the fowler. His bold stroke had been all in vain. Not a smuggler had been captured, though—and here was a grain of comfort—Robin Norcott was missing.

The second discomfited individual was the chief boatswain of the coastguard station when he marched his men down to the scene of the night's surprise, and expected at least to find some haul of contraband goods to recompense him for the prisoners he had hoped to take. But his men might have been keeping watch over an uninhabited coast. Not a keg of French brandy broke the level shore, along which the impudent sandpipers played unconcernedly. True, some boats were missing—notably Sweetapple's dingey—and buoys floating idly marked their local habitation, while the sand above high-water mark was scarred with keel marks and trampled with

footprints. But for these, the whole affair might have been a nightmare of Jonas Teague's, at whom, indeed, the chief boatswain swore for his pains.

But it was the third individual who had the cruelest surprise of all. This was Robin Norcott, who, dozing through cold and weariness during the small hours, at the bottom of the dingey, awoke at dawn to find himself well out at sea. The morning was still and hazy, the currents running swiftly. No landmarks were visible, but Norcott fancied he knew whereabouts he was, and prepared to take out the oars and row himself ashore again. Then came the shock above referred to—the oars were nowhere to be found.

In her hurry and excitement Bessie had forgotten that they were not in the boat, and had sent him adrift without them!

How wearily the next twelve

hours passed to the poor lad adrift at sea in an open, oarless boat, racked with thirst and hunger and wet and cold, can be better imagined than described. As the day wore on, the haze lifted, and he made out the indistinct outline of the Hampshire coast, and concluded he was being carried up Channel. He recollected, too, that the dangerous Needles and the shelving ledges off Christchurch Bay at the entrance of the Solent, lay ahead, unseen. Now and then he saw a sail and made a signal of distress with his shirt. But it was never noticed; none came near him. Toward evening the wind got up, and the sky became covered with dark, hurrying clouds. Norcott's seafaring instinct foresaw bad weather, and he gave himself up for lost.

The sea rose, and the waves dashed over the little boat, which he had to bail out with his hat.

A squall burst, which, though it threatened to capsize the skiff, brought the welcome rain. Norcott collected a few drops in his hat, and allayed, temporarily, his raging thirst. As night fell, the drowsiness of weakness stole over him. Despite his fear of being run down in the darkness by some passing vessel, he could not keep himself from dozing fitfully. How long he slept he could not tell, but the bumping of the boat's bottom aroused him with a start.

Was he being run down, or was he foundering?

Neither. The dingey was aground on a rocky ledge, which was slowly, but steadily, wearing a hole in her. Above, in the uncertain light of dawn, Norcott could just make out a towering mass of headland, not far off. The dingey was filling fast. There was evidently nothing for it but to swim for shore. Norcott threw off his coat, and

plunging into the waves seething over the hidden rocks, struck out for the land.

For some time he doubted if his strength, already much exhausted, would hold out so as to enable him to reach it. It was terribly hard work fighting against the swell and the falling tide. The headland was further off than he had expected.

But, at length, when nearly spent, and all hope well-nigh lost, his feet touched the bottom.

A few more struggles, and he sank exhausted on the narrow strip of beach under Hengistbury Head.





CHAPTER V.

IN PERIL OF THE PRESS GANG.

IT would have been hard to recognize in the weary, footsore traveler, coatless and tattered, who limped, two days later, into the town of Poole, the smart young fisherman, six feet one in his stockings, who was Jonas Teague's successful rival in Bessie Sweetapple's affections. How the former would have chuckled had he met him!

Without a penny in his pocket, Robin Norcott was at his wits' end where to turn. Even without Bessie's last warning words, he would not have risked showing himself near home at present.

As it was, he loitered aimlessly down the quay, in mortal fear of being seen and recognized by some acquaintance from Purbeck.

The harbor was full. A fleet of fishing vessels, bound for the coast of Newfoundland—for the headquarters of the wealthy Cod Fishery Company was at Poole—was flying the Blue Peter at the mastheads, and hastily loading stores for an immediate departure, now that they had got word that this part of the Channel was, at present, free from French privateers.

It struck Norcott that here might be the means of escape from his native shores, which, for the time being, he had made too hot to hold him. In a very short space of time he had had an interview with the mate of one of the ships, had discovered that he was still short-handed, and had bound himself to him for the voyage.

The mate then proposed they

should adjourn to the Antelope and wet the agreement.

It was market day, and the narrow streets of the old town were alive with country people in smock frocks, as well as with seafaring men. The mail coach rattling in over the uneven stones from Wimborne on its way to Dorchester and Weymouth while the guard blew a blast on his horn, to warn the lumber wagons and the farmers' gigs of the way. It pulled up at the London inn, which thenceforward for a few minutes, became a focus of attraction. There was a sound of clinking glasses from the bar, where the news of Bonaparte's latest victory in Spain was being retailed, while the steaming horse disappeared through the dog-gate gateway into the yard.

Upon this metropolitan whirl of excitement Robin gazed with wonder from the door of the Antelope at the corner.

utterly absorbed was he in all going on around that he completely failed to perceive a sudden silence and an ominous lull which came over the crowded, busy street. The men fled and disappeared like birds before a storm, and it was deserted by all but women and children.

Then, suddenly, down a side street close at hand came the heavy tramp of armed men, and with a rush, the dreaded press-gang burst across the street and into the tavern.

"Run, man, run for your life!" cried the landlord, shoving Norcott violently behind the bar and through a door beyond.





CHAPTER VI.

TO SERVE THE KING.

RORCOTT found himself in a back yard. But the sailors had marked him down and were after him. All his weariness and sore feet forgotten, he doubled out of a gate and down a side street.

Here a stately old red brick mansion of the days of Queen Anne, fronted with a high iron palisade, stood with open gates and doors, as if to receive him.

In an instant Robin had rushed up the wide flight of steps into the large stone hall.

Against the wall stood a sedan chair. To open its door, to screw

himself into its recess, and to close it upon him, drawing down the blinds, was the work of a moment.

By great good luck no one was about, and he was unperceived. He breathed more freely when he heard afar the bo's'n's whistle recalling his pursuers, and the tramp of the baffled press gang growing fainter and fainter in the distance.

But the sedan chair, though somewhat cramped in its accommodation for such long legs as those of Norcott, was more comfortable quarters than he had enjoyed for some days past. Added to this, the mate of the Newfoundland brig had been generous in his treat, and half-starved as Norcott was, the liquor had gone somewhat to his head. So, in a very short time, he was slumbering peacefully against the padded cushions of the sedan, oblivious alike of coastguards and press gangs.

It was quite dark when he was awakened, to his horror, by talking close to him. Peeping cautiously from behind the blinds he saw the spacious hall and staircase lighted up, and two old chairmen in long greatcoats and mufflers, standing chatting by the door, and he perceived that he was in a dilemma.

Presently the chairmen became suddenly silent, and down the broad oak stairs tripped a pretty young lady, whose short white muslin frock and pink sash were partially concealed by her long wadded cloak. She was followed by a tall young fellow, very like her in face, gorgeous in regimentals of scarlet and gold.

The pair stopped at the dining-room door, and when it was opened Norcott could see the young lady kissing "good-night" to a portly old gentleman in a bag wig and snuff-colored coat, who

sat sipping his port wine at a large black mahogany table resplendent with silver and glass.

Such visions of magnificence fairly made Norcott rub his eyes and ask himself if he were still asleep and dreaming.

But any doubts he had on the subject were promptly dispelled by the very realistic scream uttered by the young lady, when, on the door of her chair being opened, and she about to step in, she perceived Norcott.

"O Charles! Papa! there's a man—a man in my chair!"

The next moment Norcott found himself seized by the two chairmen and dragged blinking under the hall lamp.

The young lady was clinging, still screaming, (which was considered a ladylike accomplishment in those days) to her soldier brother. The old gentleman had left his port wine hastily, and waddled out into the hall, where he stood

in a great rage, asking a lot of questions nobody answered.

Robin, in his long sea boots and his jersey, stood looking rather sheepish. But all the same there was something honest about his dark blue eyes, which, with their yellow red hair, the Purbeck folk get from the Saxon settlers of yore.

The captain, having satisfied himself that Robin was neither drunk nor a vagabond, clapped his hand on his shoulder (he had to reach up to do it) and led him into the dining room, where the crossed cod-tails, the arms of the Codfishery Company, were carved in marble under the high Inigo Jones mantelshelf.

"The press gang's been through the town this afternoon, I hear, and I shouldn't be surprised if you're one of the poor devils they've been after!"

Norcott pulled his forelock.

"Ye be a'mwost right, zur. I've

had a terrible narrer escape thiz toime!"

"But you're a fisherman, if I mistake not," put in the old gentleman, somewhat appeased, and taking a copious pinch of snuff; "and you should be ready to serve His Majesty in times like these, when England wants every strong arm she can muster to repel the frog-eating Frenchman——"

"Yes, yes, father," interrupted the son; "and I've no doubt but what a fine fellow like this *is* quite ready to serve the king—but not at sea with nothing but a plank between him and eternity. Such long legs as those were never made to be cooped up between decks, aye?"

"I beänt entirely a zeafeären chap, zur," quoth Robin; "my father owns a eälehouse ower Purbeck way," he added, not caring to be too explicit. "But I want to zee the world a bit, and I've got a berth on a cod boat."

"Very good, indeed, very good," remarked the old gentleman, who had returned to his mahogany, with an admiring glance at the cod-tails on the mantelpiece, for he himself was an important member of the Worshipful Company.

"No, no, father," again interrupted the son, "I don't agree with you at all. By George! man, if you want to see the world, take the king's shilling, and see it gloriously. It's such chaps as you we want to fight Bony with. Look at this, my lad," he added, pointing to his uniform, "you'd make a fine grenadier!"

So saying, much to the old gentleman's evident dissatisfaction, he poured Robin out a bumper of port wine.

"Here, my fine fellow, drink this to the king's health and come and join us. A soldier's life is merrier than a sailor's or a clodhopper's, and you'll come back

a hero from foreign parts, and all the girls will set their caps at you!"

The port wine was good, and the young captain brave in his scarlet glory. The martial spirit, which was then pulsating through the length and breadth of England, shot with a sudden burst into the heart of the country lad, and fired him with ambition for a soldier's career.

He slept that night on a shake-down in the merchant's coach-house, for he dared not show himself about the town, and the captain did not care to lose sight of his recruit.

Next morning the latter gave him a guinea and a letter to a recruiting sergeant of his own regiment who was at Wimborne.

After breakfast Norcott set off thither. The captain bade him good-by cheerily.

"I shall see you at headquarters, my man, ere long, and I shall

get you posted to my own company, and I warrant me a smart fellow like you won't take long learning your goose step. And there's no time to lose, by George! for the *Diehards* are under orders for Spain. They can't do without us when there is work afoot!"

But the young lady's soft eyes looked at him sadly.

"Good-by," she said, "I wish you every luck in the war. How I wish it were over, and my brother safe back again! For the sake of your own sister, if you have one, take care of our captain, and do your duty yourself, as I feel sure you will. But don't forget your sweetheart, and those you leave behind at home," she added shyly.



CHAPTER VII.

A NARROW ESCAPE BEFORE BADAJOZ.

THE *Diehards* were on the march to Badajoz, the hard nut that it puzzled the Allies so to crack during the Peninsular campaign, and which had already repulsed two attacks.

They were in very different plight to that in which they had sailed so gayly out of Portsmouth Harbor. Where were the powdered heads, the brightly burnished stars on the tall hats, and the scarlet uniforms? Black with dirt and threadbare, without a change of clothes, with ragged beards and worn faces, and boots

that hardly hung together on their feet—they were the *Die-hards* still, the proud victors of many a bloody fight, the men who have handed down imperishably the glory of the British soldier.

But they were often starving, and generally hungry, these men of iron. There were no ubiquitous war-correspondents in those days to sniff out their grievances, and the commissariat arrangements were very elementary, even where they existed at all. The usual allowance of two pounds of meat, with very rarely a little flour, was short commons for a grenadier six-feet-one in his stockings. No wonder they stole, even though some were hanged for it.

The captain, he of Poole, who had enlisted Norcott, was inspecting his company on parade, in the morning, as they formed up in the village street surrounded by a stately, lazy crowd of gaping

Spaniards. As he passed by Norcott, there was suddenly a portentous cock-crow from beneath the latter's tall hat.

"Hullo, Norcott! and what have you got there?"

Robin stood stiffly and imperturbably to attention—there was nothing sheepish about him now—and saluted.


"A cock I bought out foraging this morning, zur!"

"Hum!" remarked the officer, "you offered four and took it with five, aye?" probably meaning fingers. But he passed on and said no more, for Robin was a favorite of his.

"You got off aisy, then, be-gorra," quoth a huge Irishman, Macclaughlan, the wit of the Grenadier company, to Norcott at the midday halt as they lay and rested in an olive garden. "An' so did I, shure, this morning, afore we was off. Some muleteer fellows came into camp with pig-

skins full of wine slung on each side the bastes, an' faith! while some of the men went on one side and got them to measure out the liquor for them, I and O'Kelly were after making a hole in t'other pigskin with a knife all the time. So it was both lightened equally the skins became, though the Spaniard didn't seem to see it, for he cried, 'Ladrone, ladrone!' and would have kicked up a fearful shindy if we hadn't hustled him out o' the camp. It was good wine, begorra, but nothing to be compared to the craythur! Ah, lads! if I was only back in ould Oireland!"

That night the Grenadier company was billeted in the village chapel, lying as usual on straw. But the orders were to roll it up neatly in the blankets during the day. Here the regiment halted a day to rest, and the men set about foraging for supplies. As good luck would have it, next



door to the chapel was a farmyard full of pigs. Ere long one of these had died an untimely death by a sergeant's pike, and its remains had been conveyed into the chapel. But the farmer suspected something was wrong, for the pig's demise had not been noiseless, and came to see. Hiding the animal in the straw under the blankets was a poor expedient, and Macclaughlan, good Catholic as he was, came in and suggested a better. In a twinkling, poor piggy was safely ensconced under the long robe of the figure of the Virgin on the chapel altar! The men breathed freely; there was no chance of the theft being discovered now, and of their having their grog stopped, and that night there was much cooking of savory meat in the kettles.

But the ingenious Irishman, however, nearly let the cat out of the bag by an explosion of laughter when he saw the priest and

the irate farmer, who came to search the chapel, make a profound obeisance to the statue, including the concealed pig.

Another time Macclaughlan's stories did good service to his comrades in procuring them a meal of bread, a great luxury in those times, when wheat, not even flour, was their usual ration. During a halt at a small village, a foraging party of about twenty men discovered a lone sort of general shop. They asked the woman if she had any loaves for sale, but she, pointing to the oven at the back of the house, made them understand that there would be some ready in about an hour. So Macclaughlan sat down at the shop door, and in his queer Spanish jargon, intermixed with native Hibernicisms, began to enthrall the old lady with some yarns of his campaigning experiences.

In the meantime his comrades were not idle, and with their bay-

men made a hole through the back of the oven and extricated every loaf. Then they decamped; and you may be sure that Macclaughlan did not waste much time in pity for the unlucky dame, who, when she went to withdraw her bread, found her oven empty, and the light gleaming through the hole at the back. On the contrary, he hurried back to camp to enjoy the fruits of his storytelling.

Two days later the regiment reached the lines before Badajoz, and immediately took their share of work in the trenches. The weather was very rainy, which made the work heavier, filling the trenches and crumbling the out-works. The sallies of the garrison and the explosions of concealed mines added to the harassing nature of the work. Norcott felt a sharp and bloody battle was less trying to the nerves than this wearing warfare. One grim night

especially he passed, which deserves mention.

One of his officers, a lieutenant had some spite against him for some real or fancied trifling misconduct. In the hurry and bustle of the constant moving, and the frequent gaps in the ranks, officers could not be expected to judge so accurately of their men's characters as in the piping times of peace. Often, in sharp work, the most troublesome soldier on parade will prove the best fighter.

Anyhow, Norcott found himself posted as sentry in a field of corn, where, after half an hour or so, he came to the conclusion that the enemy on the walls above had found him out, for they kept making shots at him. He very soon discovered that it was the reflection of the starlight, or of the lights of Badajoz, on the brass star in front of his tall hat that attracted their attention. This, however, was soon remedied by

placing the obnoxious headgear upright on the loading rod of his musket, and sitting down at some distance, covered with his forage cap.

Thus the night passed, and the soldier's thoughts, as he heard the chimes from the city ringing out the hours, involuntarily fled back to his old Purbeck home. Then, and not for the first time by any means, he took out a dirty letter which he carried in his breast pocket.

Robin was "no scholard," as he put it himself; but much conning had taught him the contents by heart:

This is to warn you not to think of coming back here awhile, for all is knowed. Your sweetart be a-goen to marry a Kwareman. From

YOUR TRUE WELL-WISHER.

Then afresh the sharp stab of pain came over him, as on the day when he had first received the

scrawl. He saw a vision of Bessie, as he first remembered her, a little golden-haired child, paddling on the Studland sands. He forgot the French sentries, and cried aloud in his grief:

"I wouldn't 'a' thought it of ye, Bessie—I wouldn't, indeed!"

The yellow southern dawn gleamed over the rocky hills eastward, and recalled him to a recollection of his whereabouts.

The officer had not been near him to relieve him all night!

Norcott jumped up, and fetching his hat and his loading rod, hurried back to the picket to report himself.

The hat was pierced with two bullet holes!





CHAPTER VIII.

IN THE BREACH AT BADAJOZ.

IT was a warm, muggy spring night in the south of Spain, cloudy and still. The British lines before Badajoz were unusually silent, so that the sentries' voices along the ramparts, proclaiming from hour to hour that all was well in the doomed city, rang clearly across the intervening ditch.

The storming parties had been told off to each breach, and the forlorn hope, with the engineers, armed with scaling ladders and grass bags, had fallen in.

Among the forlorn hope was Robin Norcott.

About nine o'clock the signal to advance was given. There was an interval of waiting in strange silence, which was only broken by Macclaughlan's whispered adjuration to his comrade.

"An' now, Norcott, man, don't ye be afther forgittin' entoirely. If it plaze the Lord that we take the place, and hunt them, blessed Frenchies at last, it's at the silver-smith's shop we'll be meeting, you and Tom Smith and I. Ye'll be rememberin' the shop when we lay in Badajoz, after Talavera, eh? Well, then, it's a fine one entoirely, an' I've got a piece o' taller candle in my pocket to light us round it. An' they say as the General himself has ordered a three hours' plunder! The saints reward him!"

The signal to advance interrupted him, and the party rushed onward to the great breach. As they reached the wall the French sentry challenged three times.

He received no answer, and there followed a shower of grape and canister and fireballs, which dealt destruction among the brave little band.

At the very foot of the ladder poor Macclaughlan's fun was quenched forever, and his plundering appointment was never kept. Tom Smith, too, was nowhere to be seen. Norcott himself had a narrow escape. Already wounded by two slug shots in the left knee, a musket ball struck his side, which, but for the tin canteen, in which it left two holes, must have given a mortal wound.

The din and the tumult increased every instant. The ramparts were covered with the masses of the defenders, and already a brisk firing announced that the castle, at the opposite side of the city, was being stormed. Then the attack began on the third side, and a storming

party assailed the curtain between two forts. They appeared to meet with no resistance, and the broad, red stream of British blood flowed like hot lava into the breach. Then came a sudden thunder, a vivid flash, and a bursting mine sent hundreds to their doom.

There was a moment's hesitation, and then the exasperated assailants, re-enforced by swarms from behind, crowded over the ditch and the ravelin like a whirlwind, in answer to their officers' shouts of "Come on, my lads!"

But, in the great breach beyond, a bitter disappointment was awaiting them. When they at length gained it, after such a terrible struggle, what was their discouragement to find it closed with a cruel and immovable *chevaux de frise* of keen-edged sword blades, while the ascent was covered with loose planks studded with nails, on which the

foremost men slipped up and rolled down on those behind. Meanwhile, the enemy gazed sullenly over the ramparts, hurling fireballs and asking their victims, "Why they did not come into Badajoz?"

For some time Norcott worked with the foremost, gashing his hands in ineffectual efforts to move the sword blades, till loss of blood, from these and his earlier wounds, made him feel weak and faint.

"Look here, Norcott, you must go to the rear, while you've still strength!"

It was the captain's voice, and his strong arm that gently pushed the helpless Robin back toward the ladders.

But it was no easy matter to descend these, choked as they were with dead and dying, hanging as they fell, some with their feet caught in the rungs. Amid the entreaties of the

wounded, he pushed down three lots, and then crawled over the others into the frightful heap of dead and dying lying below. Then, too weakened to walk, he dragged himself on his hands and knees out of the enemy's fire, which never slackened for a moment.

At a little distance, who should come cantering along from the heights behind the quarries, where he had been surveying the assault, but Lord Wellington himself, surrounded by his staff.

In vain Robin tried to raise himself up and stand at attention. His strength gave way, and all he could manage was a feeble salute.

To his astonishment, the pawing charger was reined up, and the eagle-eyed commander inquired to what regiment the wounded man belonged.

Robin replied, adding that he had been one of the forlorn hope.

"Are you badly hurt, my man?" asked the general.

Robin explained the shot-wounds in the knee, and showed his hands gashed by the *chevaux de frise*:

"Are any of the men in the town, d'ye think?" he asked further.

"No, my lord," replied Robin; "and if I may make so bold for to say so, I don't think any of them will be to-night." And he went on to describe the murderous *chevaux de frise* and the fire the enemy kept up behind them.

Then Lord Wellington called two of his staff, and to one gave hurried orders which sent him galloping off at full speed. The other dismounted, and binding up Robin's leg with a silk handkerchief, directed him behind a hill, where he found a surgeon to attend to his wounds.

There he lay till dawn broke, half unconscious from loss of

blood, and only vaguely realizing that with sunrise the French had fled over the bridge to Fort St. Christoval, where they surrendered, and that the Fourth Regiment had entered the town of San Vincente, and were patrolling the brilliant but silent streets unhindered.

Lucky it was, too, for Robert, though perhaps he hardly thought so at the time, that for the next two days and nights he lay prostrate and helpless, on his back in hospital, unable to share in the success of Badajoz, which, for scenes of shameless rapacity, cruel murder, and rapine, is probably unequaled in the annals of modern warfare.

But it gave him a lesson. Never again did he enter into a such rash engagement as he had made with Tom Smith and Peter Macclaughlan.



CHAPTER IX.

TEAGUE TELLS A PIECE OF NEWS.

IT was not for three weeks after the surprise related in a former chapter—such was the vigilance of the coast-guards in locking the stable gates after the horse had been stolen—that old Norcott dared set to work to recover the haul in which they had so rudely interrupted him.

After all, it was not so far to seek, had they only known where to look.

Choosing a cloudy night, old Norcott and his confederates proceeded to haul up a very innocent looking white buoy

floating unconcernedly on the tide among Sweetapple's fishing boats. They soon brought to the surface keg after keg of good French brandy, threaded, like a gigantic necklace, on a long rope, and none the worse for their somewhat prolonged sea bath. These were hauled ashore, and carried up the cliff to be stowed away, like the rest, in the cave behind the Blue Anchor, whence, at an opportune moment, they were conveyed into the town in the donkey cart, covered with a load of bracken.

About that time Bessie Sweetapple, walking home from Corfe Market toward dusk, heard footsteps behind her. The girl was no coward, and was used from her early youth to roam the heaths alone, yet it was with a sense of relief she found the path mounting the detached hillock, crowned by a huge erratic boulder, the Agglestone, or the Devil's nightcap,

as the people called it, whence she could see all around her.

She had not to wait long before Jonas Teague's unwelcome face made its appearance from behind a furze bush.

"I hope I didn't scare ye, Bess," he began gently, in a fawning tone which he meant to be very tender, but which was absolutely loathsome to the girl.

"Nothen'd scare me, as ye knows well, Jonas Teague," replied Bessie, drawing herself up to her full height and looking him in the face. "But all the zame I thought as how ye were th' oold gentleman himself a-come to pick up his nightcap, which t' vo'k do säy this 'ere stone be, the which he throwed one day at Corfe Castle when he wur a-zitten on t' Needles——"

"Can't ye be zerious, Bess, an' hear a chap out? I've had a terrible hard run after ye all th' wäy vrom Carfe."

"I doesn't want t' heär no mmore——"

"Ah! but ye shall, Bess!" and he came up quite close to the shrinking girl, and spoke quickly "I've kep' it in all this long time an' now I *will* speäk. I'm just a-drown'd wid love vor ye, Bessie an' I've been a terrible zight worse nor ever zince I stole that kiss, Bess; but I'll waët awhile lass, and bide my time, if you'll but give me a little hope like——"

Bessie's blue eyes flashed, and her teeth clenched.

"Jonas Teague," she hissed, "I wish I was yer own zize that I might knock ye down vor daren to speak like thiz! I knows ye mean and znaken' tricks, Jonas Teague. I zaw ye that night though ye didn't goo vor ta zee me—an' yer a coward, an' I hate th' zight o' ye!"

She turned on her heel majestically, and stalked down the hill.

Jonas Teague's face grew very

unpleasant to look upon, and he called after her.

"Bessie Sweetapple, Bessie Sweetapple, I've a goodish bit o' noos vor ye, that it'll be worth yer while to hear!"

Bessie strode on without turning. He followed.

"Have ye heard o' Robin Narkit lately like?"

Bessie stopped involuntarily.

"What do ye meän? Robin Norcott's away just a' present. I zent him myzelf."

Jonas Teague chuckled.

"I darezay ye did. But it's likely he'll stay awäy longer nor ye meänt him ta."

Bessie's face grew white under her sunburn, and she shook Teague's arm.

"What are ye driven' at, man? Is he dead—drowned?"

"Not drowned, but mmost likely to be dead sooner or later. He's gone away to vurrin' parts, to be made vood vor powder!"

"'Listed? Robin a soldier? Ah no! ye're lyen to vrighten me."

"I'd be ever so zorry to vrighten yër, Bessie, lass, but it's true. A couzin o' mine o' Swanage, as is in a stone boat a runs to Portsmouth with stone zee'd th' regiment a-com marchin' down th' streats in thei red coats, wid th' vlags vlyin' ar th' bands a-playin'. An' they zailed off ta th' war, to vigh Bony in Zpain, and Narkit, h wur among 'em, as zure as I'm a livin' man. My couzin knowed him at once——"

But Bessie had started of running down the hill as hard as she could, for fear she should burst into tears before Jonas Teague.

This latter worthy then took himself home, and, with infinite trouble and much brain-racking and wasting of paper, concocted the letter we have seen Robin Norcott read in the lines before Badajoz.



CHAPTER X.

THE GREAT VICTORY OF VITTORIA.



IT was in a great measure Norcott's own fault that he lay for several weary months in hospital at Estremoy. His wounds, severe though they were, would have healed much quicker could he have brought himself to adhere to the doctor's prohibition of wine and spirits. But Lord Wellington's army in the Peninsula fought on other principles than those of his worthy successor seventy years later during the Nile campaign, and teetotalism was simply unknown. Ill, therefore, did the invalids

brook being denied their liquor, and many and ingenious were the schemes they devised to evade its prohibition.

Across the street, opposite the large house which had been turned into a hospital, stood, Tantalus-like, a country wineshop, tormenting the sick as the grapes did aforetime the fox. The landlord, in his lethargic Southern way, seemed to spend the day at the door. Here, from across the narrow street, a large tin kettle, slung on a long rope and containing coin of the realm, would descend to him several times a day, to be refilled with the equivalent in wine. The other wards soon were aware of this expedient; the landlord reaped as fine a harvest of money as did the surgeons of inflamed wounds, sometimes resulting in the loss of limb, and even of life.

It was only at Ciudad Rodrigo that Norcott rejoined his corps,

flushed with the victory of Salamanca, where it had taken from the French a new drum major's staff, value some fifty pounds, and which replaced the old worn-out one the *Diehards* had also taken from the French in the Dutch expedition under the Duke of York.

An agreeable surprise here awaited him. He was promoted corporal for Badajoz.

"And you've earned it well, my man!" said the captain kindly, touching the brand-new stripes on Norcott's dirty tunic. "It's better than sailing, isn't it, or even smuggling?" he added, with a laugh—for one night, when they lay under a tree on picket before Cuidad Rodrigo, Norcott had confessed his former avocation to his officer.

"Aye, zur," laughed Robin, "an' I've never regretted that sedan chair nap. But the old gentleman and the young lady

would be terrible puzzled t' know us again now, I reckon!"

"Yes, indeed, corporal, we be at least twenty years older, and as for these togs, there's not much to choose between us in the matter of rags and dirt; and I say 'thank you' for a pair of my father's worn-out boots he gave the gardener."

It was in May that the division of which the *Diehards* formed part broke up from cantonment at Ciudad Rodrigo, and started on the celebrated march to Vittoria. Wellington and his veterans surmounted difficulties only equaled by those overcome by Hannibal and Napoleon in the Alps. They swooped down on that cowardly king, Joseph, over mountain passes, where a hundred men were required to drag up on gun; through narrow defiles where whole corps were conveyed across chasms in a basket slung on a rope; across unfordable

ivers, and by mountain-tracks. He fled before them, evacuating and blowing up the fine Castle of Burgos, the strong positions his garrisons occupied on sea-board and mountain flank, till they hemmed him in, in the narrow basin of Vittoria, laden with the gold and treasures of Spain, and with only the road to France open behind him.

There, in the hazy, muggy dawn of a rainy June day, the British fell upon him, like scarlet torrents breaking into furious rapid rivers, down from the mountain sides around.

Norcott had been on duty the night before, mounting guard at the general's quarters in a deserted house. In an outhouse he and some others had the good luck to light on a quantity of broad beans, which they cooked and made a good meal off. There was only just time to stuff the remainder into his knapsack,

when the bugle sounded the advance next morning.

Then there came a perilous passage of the narrow bridge of Nanclares, which lay between them and the enemy. Here the latter's cannon made havoc; but this obstacle once passed, the British flooded both banks of the river Zadora, which divided the basin, and swept the French before them—a flying mass of all arms, of convoy, of carriages, of treasure wagons, even of women and children—onward to within a mile of the town of Vittoria. Across woods and plains covered with standing corn, with vineyards, and hamlets, spread the rout, till the roads were blocked up with guns and wagons and traveling carriages. Scattered about the fields in inextricable confusion were ladies and children, rich dresses, priceless art treasures, military chests full of gold, parrots and monkeys.

jewels and cases of champagne. The French had been so long campaigning in Spain that it was like a picnic to them. But a picnic with what an ending!

When dusk stopped the pursuit, the *Diehards* encamped a few miles west of Vittoria, and the men set off to forage. Norcott was lucky enough to capture one of the hundreds of stray sheep the French had left behind, and was busy killing it with his bayonet when the captain passed by. He was hardly less starved than the men.

"Hullo, Norcott, you seem a capital butcher!"

"Would you loike a piece, zur?"

"I certainly should. I'm amazingly hungry."

So Norcott cut him off a quarter, and he carried it off without being fastidious about the skinning.

Two of the company had meantime collected a fire of every

imaginable kind of wood—gates, doors, chairs, and window frames, which soon set the mutton boiling.

Then there was a cheer of delight, when Dunderton (he was the butt of the company) was seen returning with his shirt tied into an impromptu sack. It seemed very heavy, and Dunderton very hot.

"Well, I'm bothered," cried one, "if old Dunderhead hasn't got some flour! Well done, Dunderhead!"

"Well done!" echoed the corporal; "we'll have a fine feast of doughnuts and mutton."

There was a lull of expectation as the man who acted as cook on this occasion got a tin dish he had taken from a dead Frenchman, and some water, and began mixing the ingredients.

"Well!" he said, "this is the rummest flour I ever saw. It fizzles—and it smells—faugh! Why, man, I'll be bothered if

the fool hasn't brought a sack of lime!"

So poor Dunderton was dispatched on the forage again. This time he was successful in finding real flour, and the dough-nuts were soon boiling in a gypsy kettle over the fire.

When the meal was nearly over, and the men began to find breath to spare from eating, someone pointed across to Norcott's feet.

"Well! I'm blessed! if the corporal aint got a new pair o' boots!"

"So he has! However did you come by them, corporal?"

"Well, as luck would have, th' other zide of the town I came across a Vrench zhoe wagon, stuck vast in a vield; the drivers had cut the trazes and galloped off. But I warn't the virst to vind it, vor there wur a crowd round o' barevoot chap worse off nor myzelf, a-vightin' vor the boots. When at last I gets a

turn, I gets hold o' vive pairs, but they wur all snatched vrom me, all but these, as I put on—an' you know I've a good long reach when I likes to hold anything above my head! But there wur a many as was tired of a'goen barefoot!"

Thus Norcott's new boots were a source of great envy in the company. Nevertheless, the next morning he had pressed them on the captain almost by force.

"I'm mwore used-like to doen without things than you be, zur. And many's the zummer time when a little chap I'd go barefoot on the zands vor dāys togither."

Norcott was not on guard again the night after the battle of Vittoria and the feast of dough-nuts and mutton. But, nevertheless, the sergeant sent him to headquarters with a message before he turned in under his blanket by the blazing camp fire.

The colonel's quarters were in

a ruined house a couple of hundred yards off across a vineyard. As Norcott passed through this, a low wailing struck on his ear in the darkness. On going to see, and fumbling about among the bushes, he found a crouching mass. On further investigation this resolved itself into a young Spanish woman, clad in good, though travel-stained garments, and lying insensible on the ground, a wailing infant in her arms.





CHAPTER XI.

A RESCUE.



REAT was the astonishment in the guardroom by the colonel's quarters when Corporal Norcott made his appearance bearing his novel prize, and deposited his burden on the rough earthen floor. The sergeant of the guard poured a spoonful of his grog between her lips. After a few minutes the girl revived, and opening a pair of the large, dark eyes which are her countrywomen's especial beauty, sat up, and drew her mantilla over her dark tresses and her crying infant.

Norcott's Spanish, though,

perhaps, not strictly grammatical, was fluent for practical purposes, and, in a few minutes, when she had recovered her bewildered senses he was able to glean something of her story.

"Ah! *Madre di Dios*," she moaned, in her terror. "Have I indeed fallen among these ferocious Englishmen! Ah! if you are Christians and not savages, kill me and my babe outright and put me out of my misery!"

It was with some difficulty that the rough-looking, though well-intentioned, tall, bearded figures around her assured her that they had no wish to do anything of the sort. With time, however, she became pacified, and told them in her florid, high-flown Spanish tongue, as her bosom heaved with sobs and she rocked her child to and fro, how she was the wife of a French sergeant of chasseurs. Of what had become of him she had no idea, as she had

not seen him for two days; but she feared the worst. In company with other women belonging to her husband's regiment, she was proceeding, in a country cart, along with the mass of fugitives toward France, when they were overtaken by a squadron of British cavalry, the drivers cut down, the horses cut adrift, and she and the other occupants fled for their lives into the fields. There she wandered till nightfall, losing her companions. In the darkness she sprained her ankle in a ditch and fainted with the pain, in which condition Norcott found her.

Her astonishment and gratitude knew no bounds when she found herself comfortably cared for with food and shelter in the guardroom.

"Ah! you English are not so bad as you were painted, after all," she said.

But still she was anxious to rejoin the French army.

"My own people live far south, and my husband, if alive, will seek me, and if not, when all this turmoil is over, they will let me know the worst in the regiment."

Norcott promised to do his best to get her across to the enemy, and was then pleased to find that, soothed by this promise, her dark eyes soon closed in slumber, as she lay on the blanket he had spread for her in a corner of the shed.

In the morning the sergeant brought word that the wife of one of the French field marshals, the Countess de Gazan, with several other ladies, who had fallen into the enemy's hands, were to be sent under a flag of truce in their own carriages to rejoin the French army. Norcott determined to convey his fair prisoner to join the party. As her ankle still precluded her walking, he and a comrade constructed a rough kind of litter, in which they

placed her. It was a walk of a mile or two, and on the way the little Spaniard, her tongue unloosed by gratitude and her fears forgotten, related with many a merry peal of laughter how she had come to marry a Frenchman. She seemed, as it were, to be apologizing for running away from her native land with one of its *quondam* conquerors.

"But I could not help it," said she. "He was so handsome, such an air! He used to follow me to chapel and make eyes at me all the time during mass! And then, one evening, he came under the bars of the window looking into the street, while my mother was preparing supper, and spoke to me. And I stayed to listen! Then I met him at dances—but my mother never noticed anything. And at last, one night I ran away with him, out of a back window. But old Dolores, the maid, who ought to have been

leep, made such a noise that my
ner woke and came after us.
d I had to get off, and leave
horse he had brought for me
ride and my baggage. But we
safe into cantonments, and
next morning the priest
ried us. My father made a
at fuss, and wanted my
sband tried by court-martial
stealing me, as he called it.

'But after a bit he forgave us.
was right though; all this that
happened is a punishment to
. But I am not sorry—I love
a dearly—and if I could only
d him again——"

And when Norcott had seen her
ely settled in the traveling
riage, in her gratitude she held
n her baby out of the carriage
dow to kiss.

Norcott did not much care
out this performance; neither
arently did the baby, for it
ed. Perhaps Norcott's beard
atched it.



CHAPTER XII.

HOW ROBIN WINS HIS STRIP

IT took, however, twelve months' hard fighting after the battle of Vittoria before Sebastian, the French stronghold in the Peninsula, fell, and, after numerous smaller battles, they were finally ousted from the Pyrenees and driven into their own territory.

It was at one of those small skirmishes that Corporal Norwood covered himself with glory and won his promotion to sergeant.

At the top of a steep mound commanding a narrow valley the enemy, by some means or other,

had posted three cannon, which considerably annoyed the advancing British. In fact, a round shot from one of them carried off the cocked hat of Lord Wellington himself.

"That was a near miss, my lord!" remarked the colonel of the *Diehards*, who was riding with the staff.

"Indeed it was; I wish you would try and stop them," was the reply.

So the colonel selected some of his grenadiers for a storming party for the purpose, and Norcott, being right-hand man, volunteered for the job.

He led his little band along the valley toward the mountain, which they scaled in zigzags to baffle the gunners' aim. When within a hundred yards of the guns they lay down behind a mound, and Norcott reconnoitered.

There were twenty-one of them and an officer, and Norcott's party

only six. But the French had no firearms.

"Now, my men," he exclaimed when they were rested, "look to your priming, that all may go right."

"All right, corporal," was the reply, "we'll follow you!"

"Now for a gold chain or a wooden leg!" cried our hero jumping up, and giving the enemy a volley.

Then, before they had time to take aim, the gallant little band charged them, and gaining the cannon, drove them down the hill to their main body of infantry.

There followed an anxious time of suspense for Norcott, after he had given the signal by waving his cap for his own brigade to advance to his support, for the French were also in movement. But by good luck the English gained the summit first, and found the storming party unhurt and in possession

of the guns, having accounted for five of the enemy.

"Well done, Norcott," said the colonel when he came up. "I did not think you were half so brave, but no man could have managed it better!"

The captain shook him warmly by the hand. "I felt sure you had something in you, from the first moment I set eyes on you, Norcott."

But our hero came in for even greater praise.

Lord Wellington himself rode up to him. He did not say much, only just asked the corporal's name, and when he heard it, remarked: "I shall think of you some day."

A few weeks afterward the captain recommended him for promotion to sergeant, and Norcott found himself in possession of sixpence a day extra pay. All the same, when (and none too soon) new clothing was dealt out

to the troops at S. Jean d
Sergeant Norcott found h
owing to the bad manager
the government, obliged
content with a private's un





CHAPTER XIII.

A PLEASANT CHANGE.

THE battles of the Adour, of Orthes, of Toulouse, had been fought and won; and the once all-powerful emperor dethroned and relegated to a tiny island in the Mediterranean. The veterans, who, after so many years of the hardest fighting that British soldier ever saw, had accomplished this feat, were leisurely wending their way through the sunny land of France, in the early summer, for embarkation at Bordeaux.

The *Diehards* were within a day's march of that city, their hearts already aflame with thoughts of England and home,

when Norcott stumbled on the most luxurious billet he had ever had in his life.

This was at a French *château* standing in its own grounds, a little off the highroad. There Sergeant Norcott and a private of the company were ordered to take up their quarters when the regiment marched into the village one Saturday evening to halt till Monday morning.

After they had had a comfortable wash in tubs in a bathroom downstairs, their host sent them up some clean stockings, with a loaf of bread and a bottle of wine, as a snack before dinner. Then came alarming news.

"I say, sergeant, they're axing us to go and dine with 'em!"

"Oh, Lor', Jones, we're not used to the likes o' 'em!"

"No, indeed! And, sergeant—there's a lady, too!"

Indeed the perpetual picnic of the last six years in the Peninsula,

during which we have seen even the officers not disdaining a meal of unskinned mutton newly killed, had decidedly unfitted our heroes for polite society. But their hosts would brook no refusal.

The brief glimpse he had caught of the merchant's dining table in the Poole mansion, on the night when he first made his captain's acquaintance, had been Norcott's sole insight into the manners and customs of his betters. The French gentleman's table was spread with glittering silver, which came awkwardly into hands unused for so long to any table weapons at all. The powdered footman in gorgeous livery was awe-striking.

"It wur a very good dinner, Jones, and plenty of it," was the sergeant's remark, when they found themselves alone. "But I'm blessed if I knowed what I was a-eaten of!"

"But they kept the glasses filled

grandly and no mistake, and it *wur* good wine," said Jones, smacking his lips.

When dinner was over, and their hostess had retired into the drawing room, our friends became less constrained, and even chatty, over their coffee and pipes. Nevertheless they were glad to be excused tea in the drawing room, and to betake themselves off to bed, especially as, their French being still very elementary, conversation was a matter of some difficulty.

The bed appeared magnificent, and boasted a feather bed on the top. But one can have too much of a good thing. Presently Jones jumped out.

"I'll be bothered, sergeant, if I can sleep on this soft thing!"

"No more can I," replied Norcott.

And they wrapped themselves in the blankets on the floor, and with their knapsacks for

pillows, were soon sleeping soundly.

But, in the morning, the hostess was in great consternation at discovering what they had done. They found her scolding a trim little black-eyed maid in a snowy cap, and telling her that "ces messieurs" probably could not sleep because there were fleas in the bed.

And the little maid shrugged her shoulders and spread out her hands, declaring, with tears in her eyes, that everything was quite clean.

Norcott's gallantry could not stand this, and he hastened to vindicate as best he could the character of both the housemaid and bed for cleanliness, but explained that they had not slept in a feather bed for six years.

The lady appeared most surprised and even touched. She invited them into a splendidly furnished drawing room (they

would so much rather have gone into the kitchen), and asked them about their campaigning experiences, producing a French and English conversation book, which facilitated matters.

Encouraged by the intense interest of the little black-eyed maid in the background, Norcot was nothing loath to launch out into a graphic description of his adventures, and to fight his battles o'er again.

The lady wiped her eyes and shook her head, while Clotilde (that was the maid's name) behind her, raised her dark eyes, wet with tears, most pityingly up to the stalwart soldier's face, and clasped her hands: "Oh, miséricorde! ces pauvres, n'ont-ils souffert?"

When, at last they made their escape into the kitchen, of course it had to be told all over again. Clotilde, indeed, appeared inclined to sit and listen all day, had not the cross old cook reminded her

that it was Sunday morning, and that she must be off to mass.

"And indeed, I think I ought to go, too, mam'zelle," suggested Norcott; "we've been very poor Christians in Spain. The last parade service we had was near Pampeluna, and we had just formed square, with a drum for the parson's books, and a knapsack for him to kneel on, when the French surprised us. Didn't the parson just cut and run, neither! Yes, mam'zelle, I think a little church would do me good—if you'd take me?"

So Norcott found himself walking toward the village church by the side of Clotilde's snowy cap; but I fancy he paid more attention to her than to the service.





CHAPTER XIV.

AT WATERLOO.

THE dogs of war were loose again, and the *Diehards* were on more at it, facing the old enemy, whom they fondly imagined they had securely disposed of. But "petit caporal," had popped up again from Elba, like a Jack-in-the-box.

The sun was sinking low upon that ever memorable 18th June, when, weary with hurried marches over roads well-nigh impassable with mud—having tasted no food all day, and worn out with perpetual changing from line to square, from square

line, to resist the successive charge of cavalry, hail of artillery, and rush of infantry, which Napoleon hurled against them—the men were beginning to despair.

It was not only the great captain himself who, as tradition says, was praying for "night or Blucher." Even in the ever shrinking, ever thinning, but ever wall-like, British squares, a sense of the awful crisis seemed to have come home to the men's minds.

But, all day long, the officers cheered them on with the continual cry of "Keep your ground, my men!"

And the *Diehards* to this day tell proudly how they never lost an inch, though at last so few were left that it was hardly possible to form square. About six o'clock Sergeant Norcott was ordered to the colors. Already that day fourteen sergeants, and officers in proportion, had been killed in charge of them—poor

colors, hanging in ribbons, on a splintered staff!

Such was the din, with the running accompaniment of balls whistling in the air, and ever and anon the fortissimo crash of exploding shells rending gaps in the scarlet wall, that Norcott never quite knew at what time his captain stepped up beside him to fill the vacant place of an officer who had just fallen. They stood shoulder to shoulder.

"This is worse than Spain, eh Norcott?" said the captain hoarsely. He was hoarse with hours of shouting.

"Well, zur, I don't say that. We're not done for yet," replied Norcott, looking down on the pale face beside him, in which the blue eyes gleamed with so strange a light, while the blood from the graze trickled slowly down the cheek.

"Not yet, but we can't last forever."

Then he raised his voice again, and shouted cheerily: "Keep your ground, my men, keep your ground. Here they come!"

And a dark mass of gigantic dragoons and cuirassiers bore down upon them, like a great wave about to overwhelm a stranded hulk, while the ground rumbled under the tramp of the horses. No hurried charge, this, but a deliberate advance, at a deliberate pace, as of men bent on gaining their point.

The *Diehards* let them come within musket shot, and then gave them volley after volley, firing low at the horses. Then amid the smoke, the dismounted men could be seen disentangling themselves from the mowed-down horses, which checked the advance of those behind, and making off as best they could, encumbered by their armor.

There came a moment's lull. While the men were reloading,

Norcott saw through the rising smoke a black speck. In an instant he knew what it was, and remembered that the saying is that you never see a shot coming unless you are in its line.

Almost before he had time to frame the thought that his doom was sealed, there was "whush" past him, and a draught of air.

At the same moment Norcott felt himself splashed all over with blood that was not his own, and the captain fell from his right side.

But instantly there was an order to form line. The infantry were coming on.

The captain half raised himself on the arm which had not been severed.

"Keep your ground, my men, the re-enforcements are coming. Keep your——"

Then he fell again, a huddled mass. Norcott could not stir to give him assistance, but someone or other drew him away, and

a lieutenant stepped into his place.

But the next charge was weaker, though quite heavy enough to tax the already harassed line; and then it was Lord Wellington himself who rode up, and gave the longed-for order to advance.

With three ringing cheers the lieutenant now in command of the regiment led the *Diehards* forward, as if endued with new vigor, and the attack became general all along the line.

The French were soon in retreat; but after a mile of the pursuit the weary English were thankful to leave it to the newly arrived and fresh Prussians, and encamp then and there on the blood-stained field of battle.

Fire and food were the first thoughts. But wood was scarce and wet. However, a fire was made, and while some were cooking, Norcott, with no heart for

food, worn though he was, wandered back to the *Diehards'* fatal stand, to look for his captain.

It was with some difficulty he found him in the uncertain moonlight, amid the countless groups of dead and dying men and horses.

Someone had dragged him under shelter of a disabled cannon, and laid him on some straw. The blue eyes were staring vacantly at the sky, but he was still breathing.

Norcott knelt down and spoke, close to the drawn face.

"Can I do anything vor yer, zur? Drink a drop o' water!"

It was all he had in his canteen, and he had not tasted any since morning.

The cooling splash seemed to revive the dying man.

"Who's that—ah, Norcott!"

"Yes, zur, it be me, zur!"

"You'll—tell them—at home—and, sergeant——"

“Yes, zur, here I be.”

“Take my watch—keep it——”

Then he suddenly started half up, the moonlight flashing on his unearthly face and ghastly figure, and cried aloud in his usual cheery voice: “Keep your ground, my lads, keep——” and then he fell back, dead.





CHAPTER XV.

A DUEL AND AN UNEXPECTED MEETING.

THE allied armies were quartered in and around Paris after the battle of Waterloo, engaged in settling Louis XVIII. on his throne. The *Diehards* lay at Colombes, a pretty little village in the valley of the Seine, and soon made themselves quite at home there. The soldiers fraternized with the peasants, and all enmity seemed at an end.

Nevertheless, the Tête de Bœuf, the village inn, with its queer outside sign, representing two officers in full dress in the act of drinking two tumblers of foaming

beer, was the scene, one night, of a great quarrel.

An enraged little French sergeant of chasseurs with plumed hat and pinched-in waist like an angry turkey cock, was hurling defiance at the towering form of Sergeant Norcott. The latter, outwardly calm, but simmering with contemptuous wrath, was wiping the contents of a glass of beer which the Frenchman had flung at him off his face.

"Ye little—cock-sparrow! I'd take ye by the neck and wring it, if ye were at least half my size!"

The Frenchman was sheltering himself behind a large table, and the alarmed landlord and his customers were endeavoring to make him apologize.

"Never! I am a soldier of the Emperor. I have fought in Spain and also at Waterloo."

"I wouldn't refer to that if I were you," growled Norcott. "I have, too!"

English fisticuffs]

Swords or pistols

"All right then

I'll take ye a

sneered Norcott.

good at hitten st

shoulder—I supp

you don't care a

don't know so mu

and pistols—but

knows enough to

likes of you."

So, eventually,

arranged to take

the next mornin

behind the slaug

retired spot safe

interruption.

The whole villa

fully upset the b

the appearance of this bellicose sergeant of chasseurs, who, now the campaign was over, had come to pay a visit to his father.

The poor captain's gold watch pointed to five o'clock, as Norcott and a fellow-sergeant found themselves at the appointed spot. Very soon afterward the little chasseur, with his nodding cock's plume and waxed mustache, came swaggering up with his second.

A few formalities were gone through.

"Shure and I don't think it's fair intoirely," Norcott's second, an Irishman, said to him. "Faith! he's got twice the mark you have!"

The seconds measured out the distances and planted their men. The Frenchman began taking aim to get his eye in, when, in the distance sounded a woman's piercing shriek, and round the corner of the slaughter house buildings tore the very little Spanish woman whom Norcott

had rescued on the field of Vittoria.

She flung herself into the chasseur's arms, and then turned defiantly to Norcott, as if daring him to fire. But her second shriek was louder than her first.

"*Madre de Dios!* It is the good English corporal!"

Then she dragged her husband up to Norcott, and pushed them into each other's arms.

"Assassins that you are both, to be thinking of killing each other! See, Auguste, it is my protector—my deliverer, to whom Tonio and I owe our lives. Embrace him, Auguste, and thank him on your knees!"

Then she implored Norcott:

"*Ah, monsieur!* forgive him! Ever since the army has been defeated and his Emperor a captive, he eats out his soul with sorrow, and thinks of nothing but revenge! But he will ask your pardon! Not so, Auguste?"

And to Norcott's extreme discomfiture the impulsive little Frenchman threw his arms (with difficulty) round the former's neck, and embraced him on both cheeks.

"*Ah, ma foi!* love is stronger than patriotism. Alas! I thought her dead—lost forever; and you saved her! How can I thank you enough?"

Norcott sheltered himself behind his British stoicism.

"Oh! you're very welcome; don't mention it!" and he put the pistols up in the case.

"Begorra, an' it's a grate pity intoirely," quoth the Irishman. "An' it's very disappointed I am!"

Nothing would satisfy madame but that Norcott should come home and breakfast with them. She woke up her father-in-law, who came down in his nightcap to embrace his daughter's preserver. He was introduced to Nicolo, a black-eyed baby un-

steady on its fat legs, and told he was the infant he had saved. Then they sat down to coffee and white bread and omelette, and the old man opened a bottle of his best wine. Everybody clinked glasses with everybody else.

"Where is that little cat?" asked his host.

"She is obstinate," replied the little Spanish dame. "She says she will not sit down to eat with a wretched Englishman who was going to butcher her brother!"

"Ah! in truth, but she *shall* do so with her sister's preserver," said the old man testily.

He went into the next room, and in a few minutes returned, pushing in a girl before him, who hung her head,

"There! give him a *shak-hands à l'Anglaise!*"

The girl looked up, and Norcott started back.

"Well, I never! Mam'zelle Clo-

tilde! Who'd a-thought o' seein' you?"

Clotilde flushed crimson, and tossed her head and turned away.

"Give him a *shak-hands*, you little stupid!" persisted her father.

"Oh! if mam'zelle would prefer to salute me after the manner of the country, *I've* no objection," quoth Norcott.

But Clotilde only got redder than ever, and fled the room.

Norcott thought to himself she looked even prettier with her smooth, black tresses uncovered, than in her snowy cap.

After this episode, great unanimity reigned at Colombes, between invaders and invaded. So much so that the soldiers helped the bare-armed, loose-stayed girls, with the blue stockings and wooden shoes, to hang out on the bushes, to dry, the linen they washed so industriously — slap, slap, slap, all day, with a bat on a

piece of stone, down in the stream by the bridge.

When harvest time came French peasants and English soldiers might have been seen, sickle in hand, side by side in the fields; or, in the evening, when the loaded carts came in, hoisting up the sheaves by the cranes, which hung from the loft doors, into the granary at the top of the houses.

Then, on the *fête* day of the patron saint of the village, they took part in the popular game of trapball, and danced till midnight out in the park, at the outdoor ball, with the village belles.

Clotilde, who was at home on a holiday, found it impossible to remain alone on the defensive, antagonistic to the English. She relented so far that, one summer's evening, when all the village world was sitting out in the street in front of their cottage doors, the men smoking, the women chat-

ting, and the young folks dancing, Norcott hazarded a question to her sister.

"Do you think, madam, you, who have married a vurriner, so to speak, that Mam'zelle Clotilde could ever be persuaded to think about doing the same?"

The little Spaniard laughed at him.

"How stupid you great big English are!" said she, with a shrug of her shoulders. "Try and persuade her yourself; I don't think you will find it very difficult."

Neither did he.





CHAPTER XVI.

HOME AT LAST.



ONE lovely summer's afternoon the village bells of Studland were chiming for afternoon service from the ancient Norman tower embosomed in the lofty elms, when Sergeant Norcott and his wife entered his native village by the Corfe road.

They had made a long and weary journey from the north country town where the *Di'hards* were now quartered, traveling now on foot, and now in the tedious road wagons of the period, except on one occasion, when a fellow-traveler, much struck by Norcott's medals and his French wife, in-

sisted on their sharing his hackney-coach with him through town.

Down the lane toward them, under the flickering shadows of the elm trees, came an old couple on their way to church. The old dame in black bonnet and red cloak, and the old man in best blue tail-coat and brass buttons, and beaver hat, hobbling on two sticks. Much French brandy had given old Norcott the gout, and crippled him before his time.

"Lawk-a-mussy me!" cried the old lady. "Here be a sojer, and a vine 'un and no mistake!"

"Well, I never," replied her companion, "he's got a terrible sight o' medals!"

The sergeant and his wife came nearer and nearer, when the former stopped short, as if he'd been shot, and faced the old dame.

"Mother! don't ye know me?"

She gave a little scream, and then he had to catch her in his stalwart arms and lean her up

against the hedge. Then he turned to his father, who stood leaning on his sticks, staring with his mouth open.

"You'd best come along 'ome, father; don't take on so!"

The old man fumbled in his pocket for a vast red silk handkerchief, and wiped his eyes.

"My child," he said, shaking his head, "I never thought as 'ow I should zet eyes on ye again!"

The parson preached only to the school-children that afternoon. All the world was at the Blue Anchor where old Norcott, quite recovered, stood treat to everybody in honor of his son's return. Everybody asked questions all at once, and stroked Robin's uniform and fingered his medals, staring too hard at poor Clotilde, the first "vurriner" that had ever been seen in Studland. And she, feeling rather lonely and out of it all, wept tears in sympathy with her mother-in-law.

But in the evening, when the house was quiet again, and Robin had just finished spelling through the few of his letters that had ever reached his parents, who could neither read nor write, something reminded him of the anonymous letter he had received so long ago, in Spain.

"And Bessie Sweetapple as was," he asked, "how be she?"

"Bessie Sweetapple as *is*," corrected his mother.

"I heerd tell as 'ow she'd gone and got married."

"There were some talk o' her and Jonas Teague, but she wouldn't have nought to zay to nim," replied his father, adding in a lower tone, "it wur he, ye know, invormed agin us that night as ye went away."

"Old Sweetapple's been gone these two years—took to his bed a year afore he died—and Bessie's a-liven with her uncle in Carfe. But bless me! if it b'aint her

herzelf. Come in, lass," said his mother.

And Bessie Sweetapple, her sun-bonnet tied loosely over her yellow hair, looked in over the half door, out of the summer twilight.

She didn't speak, but sitting down in a low chair looked up at Robin. After a few minutes' silence, she recovered herself.

"I made zure as ye was drowned, Robin, when I found out as t' oars wur not in the boat—an' then they told me az how ye'd 'listed—but I was zure as ye'd turn up zome dây—zome dây——"

She stopped, a happy smile flooding her face.

Involuntarily Robin turned away his eyes from her to Clotilde. Bessie followed the look.

"Who be she?" she faltered.

"My wife!" he answered.

There was a pause in the darkening room while you might count ten.

But in those gallant days, it was not only the *men* of England who possessed the lion's hearts. The women were not behind them in true British pluck. Bessie got up from her chair slowly, and with an effort. She went across to Clotilde, and looked down on her, taking her hand.

"I don't know as ye can understand what I zey to ye, madam, but Robin and me's been—vriends—ever zince we waz *so* high—an' I hopes az how you'll let me be ch' zame to you?"

And the impulsive, warm-hearted little Frenchwoman, yearning for sympathy, flung her arms round her and kissed her.





CHAPTER XVII.

MARBLERS' DAY AGAIN.

NINEPENCE a day pension, being an extra twopence for the wound in his knee! With this pittance Norcott and his wife struggled along at the Blue Anchor, for the old people were past much work, and glad that their long-lost son should stay with them and help them. The smuggling gang was broken up, and the new coastguard officer far too vigilant to make it possible to dream of any perquisites in that way.

Bessie was as good as her word, and she and Clotilde were not only friends, but more like sisters. And the latter had some need of

the true-hearted girl's affection. She drooped and pined and moped, away from her kith and kin and her native climate, among strangers she could not understand, and who, though kindly, were rough and uncongenial. She was being slowly consumed by homesickness.

And it was on Bessie's strong arm she would lean, to climb to her favorite haunt, the wild, white cliffs above the Old Harry Point where the waves came rolling in, over from her invisible native land across the water.

But when the spring came, and the east wind blew with biting keenness over the bay, Clotilde shriveled up before them like a hothouse plant; and when the primroses began to flower in sheltered nooks in the lanes, she and her little dead baby were laid to rest forever under the churchyard elms.

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It was Marblers' Day again at Corfe, a year later. But the day was shorn of its usual festivities, for the shadow of a great calamity hung over the stone country.

Only the morning before "someone had blundered" over an explosion in one of the quarries, and, as a result, two crushed and mangled bodies lay covered with sheets under the shed hard by, and another victim's life was ebbing fast away in the nearest cottage.

This latter was Jonas Teague.

"He can't last till morning," came the message to Bessie Sweetapple, "'an' he would lik' vor ta zee ye, an' yer ta bring Robin Narkit with ye."

They had met but little since poor Clotilde's death. A kind of loyalty to the dead girl held them both back. Certainly they had never as yet found themselves alone together.

And alone they seemed, so

silent and still lay Teague, as one already dead, save for his heavy, labored breathing. Only when Bessie put her lips close to his drawn face did he rouse.

"It's me, Jonas Teague, Bessie Sweetapple, and here be Robin Narkit."

The dying man raised himself painfully, and looked them both in the face.

"A couldn't die with a lie like that on my soul—an' I want to ask both on you's vorgiveness—a zent a letter ta Narkit—ta Spain—a lie—ta zay as you—Bessie—war a-goen—to get married ta me—I wanted—ta keep un away—I was reg'lar mad—with jealousy—I can't but be—ever so sorry—zay you forgive—me, Bess—there's no one to ztand 'twixt ye—now——"

Bessie was kneeling by his side, and, in her womanlike pity, had taken a clammy hand.

There was a long pause. The

breathing grew slower and slow
—and ceased.

Robin stooped and drew her
him.

“How could I think it ov y
Bess, how could I think it ov ye

And, with a kiss, they plighted
their troth in the presence of tl
dead.

THE END.

176

178





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